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ABSTRACT

This paper presents six generalizations based on political education research and discusses their implications for teaching citizenship in the public schools. In drawing the implications, it was assumed that citizenship education is designed to promote higher political knowledge, interest, trust, tolerance of dissent, and intellectual and participation skills. The six generalizations are that: (1) compared to factors such as family and the media, school is an important agent for transmitting political information to youth, (2) secondary students' political knowledge has decreased between 1970 and 1976, (3) an open classroom climate in which opinions about controversial issues are freely discussed is conducive to positive political attitudes, (4) emphasis on factual content and patriotic rituals is associated with negative political attitudes, (5) student participation in school governance is related to positive political attitudes, and (6) American students have a lower tolerance of political dissent than do European students. Among the implications of these generalizations are that teachers should use up-to-date instructional materials, pay attention to attitude and behavior outcomes, specify course goals, allow students to express divergent viewpoints, de-emphasize rote factual knowledge, and encourage participation in school governance and extracurricular activities. In addition, teachers should point out that good citizenship does not necessarily imply passive conformity. (Author/AV)

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WHAT DOES POLITICAL EDUCATION RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT HOW TO TEACH CITIZENSHIP?

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to state a limited but important set of tested generalizations from political education research and discuss some implications of these generalizations for teaching citizenship in the social studies curriculum. No original research studies will be reviewed here. Rather, the paper will take up where reviews usually leave off--with the generalizations drawn from those reviews. I depended most heavily on my own recent reviews (Ehman, 1977a and 1977b), but also consulted several others (Jaros, 1973; Patrick, 1967 and 1977; Riccards, 1973; and Weissberg, 1974). Two recent original studies are also used but not reviewed (N.A.E.P., 1978; Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen, 1975).

The generalizations discussed below are limited in two ways. First, they are not all of the conclusions that could possibly be stated from the political education literature. Only those that seem well founded, given the available evidence, are included. The number is further limited because only those which could generate reasonable implications for social studies teachers are stated. The second limitation follows from the fact that nearly all research done in the political education area is correlational

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and not experimental. This means that it is not legitimate to draw causal inferences about what variables influence what other variables. We can only note correlations among variables, and construct logical arguments about reasonable causal connections. Strictly speaking, if we ruled out all "non-causal" research findings from consideration, we would be able to conclude only that some special curriculum treatments, included in the few valid field experiements in the political education literature, can influence political knowledge. I have not restricted this paper to such a rigid constraint, from which it would be very difficult to generate any implications. I have instead included knowledge from valid correlational studies in forming the generalizations. The language of these generalizations and implications is cast in terms of cause and effect; this error of mine permits me to say something. Otherwise, you and I would have to endure silence on these matters, as I would be left with nothing to report.

The term "political education" in this paper is taken to mean that subpart of the political socialization process which constitutes direct instruction in schools aimed at shaping the political attitudes, knowledge and behavior of youth. This instruction takes place in classrooms as a manifestation of the explicit curriculum, as well as in non-classroom settings such as clubs and teams, governance settings, and informal groups in the school. Participation norms and skills, attitudes and knowledge are taught in these settings through peer and adult modelling, imposition of rules and through overt instruction. It is noted that this conception of political education differs somewhat from that of Patrick (1977), who characterizes political socialization as a subset of political education.

A set of assumptions about citizenship education is made in drawing the implications. These assumptions are that it is desirable in citizenship education to promote higher political knowledge, interest, trust, tolerance of dissent, confidence, intellectual skills, participation skills and activity in students. Without these assumptions, the implications do not follow from the generalizations.

Generalizations and Implications

Generalization 1: Compared to other factors such as family and the media, school is an important agent for transmitting political information to youth. Its importance increases from grade school to high school. The school is less influential in shaping political attitudes and behavior than knowledge. For racial minorities and low social status groups school is relatively more important in shaping knowledge and attitudes than for higher status groups.

Implications: The social studies teacher is in a crucial position in the political education process. Schools are more successful in teaching knowledge than attitudes and behavior. This leads to two general prescriptions for teachers. First, because political knowledge is an important product of the schools, it is imperative that this knowledge reflect the best grounded, and most up to date thinking that is available. Knowledge of the institutions, processes and outcomes of politics is the realm of the social scientist, and it is to the social sciences that teachers must attend for the most accurate content. The content base changes with new theoretical and empirical knowledge in the disciplines. This means teachers

must engage in extensive and systematic programs of reading as well as advanced coursework in the social sciences, to keep themselves current. Also, curriculum materials reflecting the most recent scholarship should be used.

Second, more attention should be paid to attitude and behavior outcomes. The research evidence shows that schooling as a whole has little or nothing to do with whether youth are apathetic or interested, whether they are passive or involved. Given the assumptions about citizenship education goals which are stipulated above, social studies teachers must increasingly commit instructional time and energy to the process of formulating and achieving specific objectives having to do with political attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Rhetoric is not enough--objectives and teaching in social studies classes must reflect our commitment to these citizenship goals.

Finally, the generalization points out that we may have the most impact where we least expect it--among lower social status students. This suggests that in classes composed of larger proportions of such students we should redouble our political education efforts. Often this will involve slower learning students, students with reading problems, students with negative attitudes toward school. Despite these difficulties the overall conclusion shows us that in these classes we have the best opportunities for making positive political knowledge and attitude gains.

Generalization 2: Although field studies show that the social studies curriculum does have positive political knowledge outcomes, the most recent longitudinal evidence suggests that political knowledge of secondary school students has decreased between 1970 and 1976.

Implications: The National Assessment reports concerning change in political knowledge from 1970 to 1976 support the second part of this contention. Because political knowledge is one important part of education in general, and citizenship education in particular, we must take this knowledge decline very seriously. It is difficult to point to any clear cause or set of causes for the drop in knowledge. Erosion of students' political trust and interest, emphasis on process goals in the social studies curriculum, displacement of traditional civics and history instruction by innovative curriculum offerings, or decreasing attention to and lower student abilities in reading-oriented study of civics and history, might be suggested as hypotheses to explain the downward trend.

Whatever the explanation, the remedy includes reemphasis of knowledge goals and objectives. Knowledge about political institutions, processes and rights is an essential foundation for responsible political thought, decision-making and action.

It is possible that the current movement toward systematic assessment of students' minimum competencies will help to refocus attention on basic political knowledge goals. Careful attention by social studies educators to the implementation of minimum competency assessment in the political knowledge areas is necessary, however. Overemphasising fundamental knowledge and ignoring decision-making and action skills is a very probable outcome of the competency assessment process, and we must do all in our power to render a careful balance among these citizenship goals.

Another potential danger in stressing basic knowledge outcomes is revealed in an important cross-cultural study of political education (Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen, 1975). Torney and her associates found

that stress on factual knowledge and printed drill materials in civics classrooms are related to negative political attitudes. Thus, overemphasis on basic knowledge goals can bring about negative attitudinal outcomes. This set of findings underscores the need for careful consideration and balance among knowledge, skill and attitude goals.

The first part of Generalization 2 is important. Research does show clearly that systematic and carefully developed curriculum can result in successful political information transmission at both the elementary and secondary levels. Specific texts, units, and other curriculum plans can make a difference, especially if their goals and objectives are clear, and the instruction is linked carefully to these aims.

Generalization 3: An open classroom climate in which opinions about controversial issues are freely discussed and in which students believe that they can influence the rules and working of the classroom, is conducive to positive student political attitudes.

Implications: The implications of this generalization are clear. Teachers should stimulate discussion of controversial issues in such a way as to assure students that they are free to express divergent viewpoints. The classroom climate should foster student decision-making and influence on how the classroom operates, so that students believe that they share responsibility with the teacher. This does not mean that the teacher should give up his or her responsibility as classroom leader and instructor, but it does mean than the teacher should not be seen as the sole source of authority and direction.

Generalization 4: Emphasis on factual content, printed drill materials and patriotic rituals is associated with negative political attitudes.

Implications: Again, the implications are clear. A balance of goals, objectives and instructional means must characterize the civics curriculum. Undue emphasis on factual content must be avoided, or we risk more negative student attitudes. In both Generalizations 3 and 4, we have seen that for attitude outcomes the "how" in teaching is at least, if not more, important than the "what."

Generalization 5: More participant and less authoritarian school organization and governance patterns are associated with positive political attitudes and behavior of students. Further, student participation in school governance and extra-curricular activities is related to positive political attitudes of students.

Implications: It is more difficult for social studies educators to act on the implications of this generalization. Yet many of us do or can exert influence over school organization, governance and extra-curricular activities, and students' participation in these processes. Some political decision-making and action curriculum programs have been and are being developed for social studies classrooms. Comparing Political Experiences, for example, emphasizes the school as a setting in which political skills are tested and strengthened by students (Gillespie and Patrick, 1974). Choosing such curricula is one means of influencing student involvement in school political processes, and perhaps in shaping the processes themselves.

Many social studies teachers sponsor extracurricular activities; these are often student government groups. These teachers can influence student attitudes and skills by making such activities meaningful to students so that they are plugged in to the decision-making that goes on in school settings.

Finally, teachers can and do influence how schools are administered. This is not always easy, of course, but intelligent and concerted effort can result in change. We all have had experiences, or have heard of others', which show that teachers can make a difference in how schools are run. This influence can be used to make schools more responsive to student participation and thereby bring about desired political attitude and behavior change in students.

Generalization 6: As compared to European students of the same age, American students have a low tolerance for political dissent, and tend not to endorse the civil and political rights of minority groups such as women.

Implications: These comparatively negative attitudes suggest that some actions should be taken to remedy the situation. Unfortunately, the researchers who draw these conclusions have not identified educational factors that cause these differences.

One reason might be that American students have a mainly consensual, rather than conflictual, view of political process. If students see consensus as a necessary and valuable base for politics, then dissent and conflict, represented by women or other minorities seeking redress of their grievances, or by political nonconformists, are seen as not deserving of their support. The students reason that a good citizen conforms to

the consensus; to disturb or threaten the consensus is bad citizenship. Therefore, support and tolerance for dissent is low.

Another explanatory factor might be the passive, rather than active, view of the good citizen that many students have developed. Activists, dissenters and political non-conformists violate the passive good citizen norms, and students may also withhold support and lack tolerance because of this stereotype they have been taught in school.

If these explanations are valid, then social studies educators must challenge the characterization, well represented in many civics texts at all grade levels, that political process is basically consensual and conflict free, and that good citizens tend to be passive, not active. The strengths and necessity of conflict, as well as citizen political activism, must be stressed, and the positive systemic outcomes of such conflict and activism must be studied. The underlying consensual and passive view of politics, the attitude that disagreement and overt action are to be avoided--these must be altered before tolerance and support for dissent and minority rights can be changed in any fundamental way. This will require systematic and widespread changes in citizenship curriculum and instruction.

Conclusion

In summing up, it is clear that we do know a few important things about political education. We can influence knowledge more directly than attitudes, and among lower status students more easily than higher status students. Knowledge outcomes may be eroding in recent years, and although minimum competency assessment efforts might redress this trend,

we must be careful to maintain balance in our goals and instruction between basic knowledge, decision-making and participation outcomes. Excessive emphasis on knowledge can have negative attitude consequences.

The amount of civics instruction seems unimportant in shaping attitudes, but the way in which this instruction takes place is critical. Open classroom climate; discussion of controversial issues; and deemphasizing patriotic rituals, reliance on facts and printed drill materials; are specific ways to foster positive student attitude outcomes. Further, school organization, governance and extra-curricular activities are important in student attitude change. Open school climates and student participation in these school processes are keys to positive attitudes.

Finally, a relative lack of support for minority rights and tolerance for dissent might be corrected through a basic change in citizenship education. The consensual, conflict free view of the political process as now represented in texts and courses must be replaced with a more realistic picture of political institutions and behavior.

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